

2011 Fitchburg State of the City: Delivered by Mayor Lisa A. Wong on 2/9/11

State Sen Jen Flanagan, State Rep. Steve DiNatale, Worcester County Sheriff Lew Evangelidis, former Mayors Mary Whitney and Dan Mylott, members of the City Council and School Committee, honored guests and citizens of this great city, I am humbled to stand before you today to deliver the 2011 State of the City Address. It is a pleasure to serve as your Mayor & I look forward to the years ahead.

As I look back on the past year, I see progress and partnerships and a lot of excitement for the future. I will talk more about this tonight. First, I want to take a moment to remember two members of our Fitchburg family that we have lost.

In May of 2010 we lost Carlton 'Bo' E. Blackwell at the age of 82. He served as the Mayor of Fitchburg from 1972-74, worked for Senator Ted Kennedy for many years and for Robert F. Kennedy in his Presidential election. He was an active member of the Fitchburg Knights of Columbus and a longtime member of St. Bernard's Parish.

In August we lost David Dwelly, a 21-year employee with the wastewater department who was only 44 years old. He was dedicated to the city and it was no surprise that he moved up the ladder from a plant operator to the manager of the Fitchburg East plant. He is missed and I would like to take a moment of silence to remember him and Mayor Blackwell.

I am so proud of our Wastewater Department. I know many City Councilors have been able to take a tour of the facility to see the many improvements that we made, including the completion of a highly successful odor control project. We had a public event with the engineers, contractors and state officials involved in the project. The press was there and wrote a great article about it in the newspaper.

What I am most proud of though, is not what is reported in the newspaper, it is what is happening behind the scenes. Employees like David have been drivers of innovation and cost savings to residents. The wastewater employees regularly meet and discuss ways to better operate the plant, and bring forward and advocate for project they believe in... all in the name of improving service and keeping costs low for residents. The Wastewater Division now has a new method of operating the East Plant that will reduce the cost of future construction at the plant while also improving water quality. This coming year the city will embark on projects to separate storm sewers and sanitary sewers this year, which will improve plant operation and water quality in the Nashua River.

Also this past year the Wastewater Division successfully closed the West Treatment Plant by directing flow from that plant to the east plant. This dramatically reduced the cost to our paper companies, and saved nearly 200 jobs in the city. Job retention has been a top priority this year and I'm pleased that we will be honoring Simonds International for a new co-generation project that will enable them to stay in Fitchburg, their home and headquarters for the past 179 years. Their CEO - Ray Martino – is here tonight. Their project will help to lower their energy costs and help keep 150 existing jobs in the city with a promising outlook for more jobs to come. I thank our wastewater employees and Simonds for their commitment to keeping jobs in Fitchburg. This go-getter attitude and teamwork is not unique to the wastewater department. Good fiscal practices, going above and beyond, strategic partnerships, creativity – these are some of the many ways to describe the work of the city staff this year. They are doing more with less and still giving back to the community.

For the past two years, our public works employees have volunteered during DPW day, a fun open house at our DPW yard on Broad Street that attracts hundreds of kids. Our emergency management personnel have run two successful "Free Movie

Nights" for the community that runs every Friday during the months of July and August with prizes each month to individuals noticed doing "random acts of kindness". People loved it!! The Police have been instrumental in providing sports to our youth. Through the Police Athletic League and the support we received in reinstituting middle school sports this past year, we have kept kids off the streets, kept them active, and taught positive teamwork. These are just a few examples.

And not to be outdone, all of YOU have stepped up. People like Ellen DiGeronimo who "retired" and is now busier than ever. Ellen – I keep finding out about yet another project you are working on like giving tours to new residents at the Community Health Center and helping to market our city. I don't know how you do it. You are a true inspiration.

And speaking of the CHC, Dr. Peter McConarty helped to bring and expand the CHC in Fitchburg. The community took a big hit emotionally and economically when Burbank Hospital closed. You, Peter, have been that constant fighter to bring back hope to that campus, to the city and to each and every one of your patients.

People like Joanne Fitz who marched in Washington DC with Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963. She still marches almost half a century later - around the Willow Street neighborhood and the Green Street Park, watching over the children as they play and talking to residents who seek her guidance, comfort and help. She marches to the New Hope Community Church, and in her very convincing way, helped convince the church to open up a Community Center on River Street.

People like Kent Bourgault - a key part of Shack's success on Main, helping in the formation of the downtown business group Pride, the purchase of new trash barrels, the continuation of Old Fashioned Bargain Days, the assistance in getting a

new performance space for the Cornerstone Performing Arts Center, or helping plans to improve the downtown streetscape and explore bringing back 2-way traffic.

It is not just these individuals who we are honoring tonight that deserve recognition. So many of you help by calling my office to inform us of issues we may not be aware of, or call asking how to help, or donate, or volunteer. Almost 100 volunteers have signed up to be a part of the Alcalde de su Calle program to learn about how city government works and how to help take leadership roles in your own neighborhood. Many of you participate in city cleanups, or help organize family events in our parks and neighborhoods. This year we have had several people volunteer to help shovel out their elderly and disabled neighbors.

To better serve the public, I am announcing the launch of a new hotline for important public safety and public works information. We will still send our updates to the news and other existing sources. However, this is not enough. The hotline number is easy to remember: (978) 345-HELP OR (978) 345-4357. We will use this as an additional way to spread reports if there are parking bans, water main breaks, road closures, trash delays and any other information we think is important.

We are still seeking more volunteers so contact my office if you want to help. We also ask for your help to fund a new Veteran's walkway that will be placed at the Upper Common around the Gazebo. In November, John Farmer and the Fitchburg Veterans Council decided to recognize All Veterans who served honorably, past and present, living and deceased, Active Duty, Reservists or Guardsmen. To date, over 100 bricks have been purchased. The cost is \$30, including the engraving and the dedication will be part of this year's Memorial Day Ceremony. I have asked Veteran Service Commissioner Ken Jones to be here this evening to assist anyone with their application for a brick, and we also have forms at City Hall and the Senior Center for those watching at home.

It has been a record year this past year for the amount of Veteran's Benefits. The dollar amount has doubled since I have been in office for service members and their families. The City Council has been wonderful, quickly approving the funds so that there are no delays. I would like to ask all the Veterans in the audience and on stage to stand and be recognized. The Council and I ask you to join us in giving round of applause to all of our Veterans.

I am proud to report that many Veterans returning home have found a place with the Fitchburg Police Department. I cannot emphasize enough the leadership and initiative that our officers display every day. The economy has been tough on both cities and families. Despite cutbacks to the police department due to declining state aid, the city has been able to make reductions in crime again.

Police Chief Robert DeMoura is here as well as members of the Fitchburg Police Department serving on the Honor Guard tonight. The crime rate for 2010 is down 4.23% from 2009, and from 2008 to 2010 Group A Crimes (the most serious) are down 9%! There are many places to credit. The bulk of the credit goes to the commitment from the police officers – top to bottom. There is also second to none quality department training.

The Sheriff's office is also playing a big role. I want to acknowledge Worcester County Sheriff Lew Evangelidis who is here with us today. The Sheriff's office has been wonderful partner, especially with the recent coordination of prisoners to help clean up the city. The prisoners are currently helping us keep the roofs at the Senior Center clear of snow. Sheriff Evangelidis has publicly made a commitment to be an effective partner, and is always in touch finding out ways he can help. Thank you Sheriff!

Through the Good Neighbor Policy, there are weekly strategy meetings with the Fitchburg State police who have been so wonderful. The Police Dept has expanded the internship program offered to students too. I wouldn't be surprised if these students become future leaders in our department or public safety departments across the state. We also work very closely with the MA State Police, ATF, DEA, and Auto Theft Bureau to conduct investigations. This is paying off and we now have a safer community. Last summer we had no serious gang violence.

Our Police Department is also managing capital assets better. We will save over \$40,000 per year by outsourcing our repairs and our general maintenance to the DPW. We also cut down on our maintenance costs by rotating out cruisers and using motorcycles whose leases are being donated to the city by private entities. The motorcycles have been a big hit, enabling our officers to interact more closely with the public. This has also helped to lower crime by allowing our officers access to areas cruisers cannot reach. The visibility of the motorcycles has been an effective deterrent of crime.

Other efforts include the Downtown Kiosk & Green Acre sub-stations. The kiosk allows instant communication with the police department about parking, downtown businesses, and other information that residents as well as visitors' need. The Green Acre substation has become a focus point to well over 25 children ranging from after school programs, to girl scouts. A yearly festival is held which attracts well over 100 residents from both Green Acres and Meadowbrook. Our partners FHA and MOC are critical to the success of not only this program but as "go to" organizations for a number of police related issues.

The most important and probably most effective tool we have in combating crime is YOU. Over the last year, there has been an increase in the number of citizens and neighborhood associations who are working with our Police Department. Some of

these groups are Greater Albee Street, Elm St., Cleghorn, Ward 1, High Rock Road, Ward 6, Green Acres, Meadowbrook, and PRIDE a downtown business group focused on revitalization of the central business district. Tonight we will honor the Elm Street Area Neighborhood Association who have grown by leaps and bounds, leading the charge for re-investment.

The close interaction with residents along with our extensive data collection and analysis has helped us obtain much needed additional state and federal funding such as E911 funding from the Executive Office of Public Safety, funding for Traffic Initiatives, renewal of the Shannon grant (a state grant program that offers resources to implement a multi-disciplinary anti-gang strategy encompassing prevention, intervention, and suppression programs utilizing law enforcement, community-based organizations, and government agencies).

Another department that has been successful in obtaining grants is the Fire Department, who last year received \$900,000 to hire 12 new firefighter. Chief Kevin Roy could not be here tonight due to a prior engagement but Deputy Chief Paul Vaillancourt and (Captain Brian Belliveau) are here tonight.

We have been so successful with grants in the fire department that we are often asked who our grant writers are. Our firefighters are our grantwriters and I believe this is the reason why we are so successful. Who better than someone who is working day in and day out to know exactly what we need and to make the case for it. These same firefighters are also making us proud through their heroism. Once again two of our Firefighters were recognized by the Governor at the Firefighter of the Year ceremony at Faneuil Hall in Boston. Lt. Rob Alicea and FF Pvt. Todd Reese were awarded the "Metal of Valor" for their heroics at a house fire in Leominster in September 2009.

Here are just a few more grants: Emergency Management and Student Awareness for Fire Education Grants totaling almost \$30,000. \$27,000 Homeland Security grant to upgrade our Regional Emergency Operations Center. An AFG grant for \$27,000 to provide new Thermal Imaging Cameras on the fire apparatus in the City. And most recently a \$675,000 federal grant to fund a new ladder truck (this is one of the largest grants given nationwide).

Through the department's efforts, we also received over \$476,000 in state funding to build a communications tower on Rollstone Hill. The Fire Department is nearing completion of a new communications tower on the Quarry on Rollstone Hill. Construction should be completed and operational in the spring of this year. The Fire Department designed the tower with leasable space on it with the intention of developing a sustained revenue stream for the city.

The tower project will benefit all city departments, including the Department of Public Works, probably one of our most hardworking departments, especially this time of year. We have not seen this much snow in decades. Most of our school age kids have probably never seen this much snow! Yet with the full support of the City Council we doubled our budget for snow and ice removal, and are probably one of the few communities across the state (or the country for that matter!) who are in not the red. We have expended approximately 75% of our budget and have just about \$170,000 remaining. Apparently the groundhog did not see his shadow on Groundhog Day which hopefully means that spring is just around the corner!

The efficiency of the department is due to the excellent management from DPW Commissioner Lenny Laakso who has aggressively sought grants for infrastructure improvement to correct problems that have existed for generations, including flooding in the Columbia Ave and Shea Street neighborhoods. Also by performing

state mandated dam inspections in-house. We have already been able to avoid spending over \$600,000.

Some of the other projects we are focusing on are: the stabilization of a section of eroded stream bank on the Nashua River, new sidewalks on Elm Street and a section of Johnson Street, and the reconstruction of the Billy Mundie baseball field at Park Hill Park. We are working with the Mass DOT on a number of bridge repair and reconstruction projects. Ashby West Road Bridge will be replaced in 2011, while the River Street and Kimball Street bridges will be rebuilt in 2011 – 2013. The Water Division has started to rebuild the clarifiers at the Regional Filtration Plant. This will assure water quality and reduce future maintenance costs. The Water Division will complete a leak survey of the water distribution system in the next month, reducing treatment costs and identifying problems in the system.

DPW replaced the streetlights on the Fifth Street Bridge with LED lights, reducing energy consumption by 70%. DPW is working to purchase the streetlight system from Unitil so that we can reduce the cost of maintaining the system. This should decrease the cost of streetlights by 50%, enabling the City to turn the streetlights back on. Negotiations are also underway for electric aggregation, which will save residents and businesses money by enabling the city to purchase from a cheaper source than Unitil's default rates. I am also fighting the current request for rate increases from Unitil and I encourage all of you to attend the public hearing we will have in Fitchburg. I will make sure to announce the details when they are set.

State Senator Jen Flanagan, and State Representative Steve DiNatale, who I would like to stand and be recognized are leading the charge at the state level to ensure Fitchburg has quality utility service at a fair price. In Addition, with the help of Rep. DiNatale and Sen. Flanagan, we were also able to get a grant for the Scott Road bridge, which will be rebuilt in 2011 and Ashby State Road in 2012, which will

be repaved in the upcoming year. We are currently working with them on getting state funding to reconstruct Rindge Road and Summer Street from John Fitch Highway to Lunenburg.

These big projects are important and key for Fitchburg to compete. But our real strength is our neighborhoods. We are nothing without them. Our neighborhoods have been taking a beating by the economy. One year ago I launched a new aggressive code enforcement initiative. We call it NICE (or Neighborhood Improvement through Code Enforcement). In one short year this group made up of the Board of Health, Building, Fire, Police, and Public Works Departments, has taken action to crack down on violations and reform policies to make sure we are using every tool we have to keep our neighborhoods strong.

Let me give you some numbers. The Fire Prevention Task Force conducted 421 inspections in the year 2010. There were 171 site issued violations which were located in the target zone. The task force conducted re-inspections of these sites until the violations were rectified. At the end of 2010 there were 134 sites that had their violations corrected. We are still going after the rest.

Abandoned Properties – The task force has completed a round of demolition. Over (13) blighted properties across the city were taken down. These ranged from dilapidated triple-deckers to abandoned single family homes. These properties were in considerable disrepair and posed risks to public health and safety. The task force is preparing for a second round of demolition to begin later this year. We are doing our homework too. Over 1600 additional dwellings have been inspected with 2381 violations issued, the majority of which have already been corrected.

The team is also going after abandoned cars and other nuisances – over 200 vehicles have been ordered removed and over 170 have been removed through the

coordination and collaboration of the BOH and the Police Dept. On the City website and included here are forms residents can use to report any abandoned or junked cars in their neighborhood.

This is an incredible amount of work, and much of this work would not have been done without a hardworking team that goes above and beyond. I especially want to recognize my chief of staff Ryan McNutt who has been organizing the team, board of health director Steve Curry, city solicitor Mike Ciota, our police and fire chiefs, DPW Commissioner, Larry Casassa, Building Commissioner Duffy Lanciani, and Chief Assessor Tom Caputi.

The current proposal to create a Student Housing Overlay District is a great example of new legislation that has come out of the NICE team. This proposal streamlines the current zoning ordinance by making the process faster while preserving and even adding to city safeguards. The pluses are numerous: expanded tax base, job creation, a vital downtown, investment in vacant buildings, support for downtown retail, increased safety in downtown neighborhoods, investment in new businesses, and improved connectivity between city and college, helping us keep students in the city even after they graduate. There are several developers I am meeting with that agree and are discussing major multi-million dollar investments in our city. I hope we will be extending a welcoming hand to them shortly with the passage of this ordinance.

When the ordinance passes, Fitchburg will see investment starting this year. There is record enrollment at Fitchburg State University and investment along the North Street corridor now connects the college to Main Street. Fitchburg is becoming more of a visible college town, creating a market to support existing businesses, attract new businesses and establish the downtown as a vibrant place full of people.

Around town, a number of exciting development projects will be finishing this year. Along the river is a new Gateway Park on Sheldon Street. As the state's first Gateway Park, this will be another key accomplishment in the city's long-term vision to construct a network of walkways, bikepaths, parks and playgrounds along the river. These "greenways" will help spur economic development.

Over a million square feet of ready to develop mill space is located along the River Street area alone. Already a development company is investing in one of the mills and converting the empty space into new housing units. Some of the new units will overlook the river and the new Gateway Park. The developer has included a path along the riverside of the development, which will create a wonderful walking loop. The development is accessible by public transit and future residents will be able to walk to the downtown and the commuter rail station.

Focusing on the year ahead, my main economic development focus is on job creation and retention - construction jobs, administrative jobs, medical jobs, manufacturing jobs, transportation jobs. We are focusing our efforts by creating the right environment for the private sector to grow. This environment means strategic investments by the public sector to incentive private investment. These investments are being made in areas that emphasize our strengths – transportation, health care and education. Recently, thanks to the efforts of our Congressman John Olver and our state delegation, we have been able to move three of the largest items on the city's wishlist forward.

- Transportation: A \$68 million new commuter rail station in West Fitchburg will be completed in 2013. This is spurring development interest in West Fitchburg and we will be seeing a lot more investment and jobs as a result.

- Health Care: An \$18 million expansion of the Community Health Center will create 145 New Jobs over 2 years. The CHC will expand dental and behavioral services, increasing patient visit capacity by 20,000 per year.
- Education: A new 55,000 SF state of the art science building with classrooms, laboratories, offices and support spaces are being built at Fitchburg State, the city's largest employer, who is already adding jobs.

Another huge step for Fitchburg State was the upgrade to university status. This has proven to be a banner year for Fitchburg State – the completion of new dormitories, expansion of the campus to Main Street, the continued strong performance of the Moot Court team (which went to the nationals yet again this January), and the Exercise and Sport Science team taking top spot in the regionals for the College Bowl. The university continues to field competitive teams in a variety of academic competitions and events. Once again, Fitchburg State hosted the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival, bringing thousands of people from 80 colleges and universities to our city. Students have also taken the initiative and organized a wonderful multi-stage music festival in our downtown Riverfront Park.

On the preK-12 education front, I want to recognize the hard work of the School Committee and ask the members to stand and be recognized. I also want to recognize the administrators (and the Superintendent of Schools is here – Andre Ravenelle), the teachers, the custodians, the nurses, and all of the support staff and non profits on their continued success. I am especially proud of how hard the students and their parents are working too to make this the best school district possible.

Because of you Fitchburg High School is recognized by the Commissioner of education for being one of only 10 high schools showing the biggest combined

increase in the percent of students scoring Proficient and Advanced in ELA and Math. Because of you our students are prepared for college and attending top schools. Because of you we went through a winter without issues and made incredible improvements in energy efficiency and facility upgrades. Because of you we are in our 4th year of the extended day program. Because of you we now have 21st century and after school programs in ALL of our schools. Because of you we have received major donations of technology and will be purchasing more shortly. Because of you there is now middle school sports. Because of you, we have lowered the dropout rate for the past 5 years.

We have come an incredibly long way. Major progress has been made towards financial stability. With much thanks to our finance team – Treasurer Brian Doheny, Auditor Dick Sarasin, Assessor Tom Caputi and Business Manager Bob Jokela, AND thanks to a City Council that has prioritized financial stability - our bond rating is up, we have a strong start to our stabilization fund, we are keeping up and even catching up to our capital needs, and we have good relations with our unions who have been leaders in preserving jobs and services for the city, and combating rising health insurance costs.

Major progress has also been made in public safety, public works, code enforcement, and economic development. I have no doubt that Fitchburg is as strong as its residents and businesses. We are a dedicated and driven bunch! We have residents like Anna Carbone who just turned 100 and still wakes up early every morning to cook for everyone, that's dedication. We have businesses like Simonds who have been in Fitchburg for 179 years, seem to be fighting to stay in Fitchburg another 179 years, when they could have easily moved somewhere else. That is dedication. Our city's youth library is the first freestanding youth library in the country, and the director Sharon Bernard though she is part time – you could never tell. She dedicated herself full time to seeing that our library is like a second

home to our residents. That is dedication. Our senior center, housed in an old armory has a director, Joan Goodwin, who probably has the busiest day of any employee. Juggling meals, activities, programs, events, marketing, tenants, building, medical services, management, meetings, accounting, politics – I know there is more... you would think she has an army to help her. She doesn't. Her compassion for the seniors, the veterans and the community is apparent. She defines dedication.

Beyond Fitchburg, our positive reputation is growing. This past year the Fitchburg Greenway Committee, which has been instrumental in preserving conservation land, and building trails and parks, was recognized as Conservationists of the Year by the Trustees of Reservations. And Fitchburg residents Donald and Nancy Featherstone have really put Fitchburg on the map. Inventors of the famous plastic pink flamingo, they are now being immortalized in the new Disney film Gnomeo and Juliet that is debuting this Friday, February 11th. The flamingo in the movie is based on the plastic flamingo and Disney has named the character none other than Featherstone!

There are many things like that that makes Fitchburg special and unique. Fitchburg is known as one of the 11 original Gateway Cities in Massachusetts. These cities have strong public institutions, good transportation, affordable housing, active community groups, arts and culture, great public parks and playgrounds and are centers of employment. Many Gateway Cities still have strong manufacturing cores, Fitchburg included. We make tools, plastics, medical equipment, office equipment, commercial furniture, chemicals, molds, orthopedic parts, spectrometers, and more recently, plastic flamingos! I look forward to the upcoming year as it will be filled with new investments, new jobs, increasing financial stability for the city, capital improvements, rising test scores, and more community events and involvement. These will happen because we will work together to make it happen. Thank you!